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## WEBB COUNTY JUDGE -- OP-ED

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### WEBB COUNTY INVITES COOPERATION ON FIFTH BRIDGE

Opinion/Editorial by Webb County Judge Louis Bruni  
667 words

Six months ago, upon being sworn in as Webb County Judge, I inherited the conflict between the city and county regarding the proposed fifth bridge. It's no secret that as a city councilman, I had opposed the county's involvement with the bridge. However, after learning that Webb County taxpayers had invested more than \$2 million to prepare a bridge application, I could not in good conscience let those resources simply go to waste.

During the spring, I approached my former colleagues from the city to see if we could work out an agreement in which the county and city would split the development and construction costs of the bridge and jointly present the bridge application that Webb County had already completed. We proposed that the county would pay the city a management fee to operate the bridge, and the city and county would share in the bridge revenues. While Mayor Betty Flores initially seemed open to the idea, other city officials abruptly shut the door on any kind of bridge partnership with the county.

At about the same time that our talks with the city were starting to sour, we began to hear rumblings from the Texas Legislature about severe budget cuts on the horizon. While our own Sen. Judith Zaffirini fortunately squelched some of the harsher budget proposals that were floating around the Capitol, lawmakers passed a budget with \$10 billion in cuts that will impact many important services.

Webb County stands to lose \$55 million in state funds for the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Medicaid over the next two-year budget cycle, even as health care costs soar and the number of indigent patients seeking medical care continues

to climb. These cuts mean that nearly 3,500 low-income children and families in Webb County will lose their health care coverage, while another 4,000 elderly and disabled people will see a noticeable reduction in the services available to them.

And that's just in the area of health care. That is to say nothing about the impact of budget cuts in other areas, such as public safety and law enforcement, nor the effects of the sluggish economy on our own county budget. Without a doubt, the Webb County Commissioners' Court faces some difficult choices in the months and years ahead as we struggle to continue providing indigent health care services and keeping the public safe without resorting to higher property taxes.

Given these growing budget concerns, coupled with the city's rejection of our invitations for a bridge partnership, I and a majority of the county commissioners feel we have no choice but to continue pursuing the fifth bridge – independently if necessary – to ensure a return on the county taxpayers' investment and to secure a stable, long-term source of revenue to support vital county services and keep property taxes low.

Let me make it clear: the county's preference would be to have a partnership with the city and we are leaving our door open. In other border locales, such as Cameron and Hidalgo counties here in Texas and Yuma County, Arizona, communities have successfully formed cooperative intergovernmental partnerships to pursue bridges and border crossings.

We believe the taxpayers of both Webb County and the City of Laredo would be well served by such a collaborative effort, particularly since Webb County has already received preliminary approval of its bridge application from the Texas Department of Transportation. A TxDOT official noted the county was "several steps ahead of the city" in the bridge application process, so it seems like a waste of taxpayers' money for the city to duplicate what the county has already completed.

The benefits of a fifth bridge are numerous, not only for the citizens who are jointly served by the City of Laredo and Webb County, but also for our state and our nation. As such, we continue to hold out hope that the City of Laredo will adopt Webb County's cooperative spirit so the fifth international bridge – Puente de la Unidad – can become a reality.

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